

REJECT

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have long-reaching impact on the victim's physical and emotional well-being. And it happens more often than many people think.

"It's more prevalent than bullying and more devastating," Williams said. "Ostracism is the invisible stepchild of bullying."

An upcoming series of community forums sponsored by Purdue Extension will attempt to bring the subject out of textbooks and research papers and down to street level. It starts with a pilot program in Carroll County in a couple of weeks. A showing of the film "Reject" will kick-start the forums.

The film will be shown Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in Indianapolis.

"Reject" director Ruth Thomas-Suh interviewed Williams several times. Thomas-Suh and Williams will participate in the three-part community forum that starts Oct. 30 in Delphi. The forum is titled "All In: Building a Positive Community."

Delphi schools adopted the slogan "You Can't Say You Can't Play" from a book by the same name, Ave said. The recess clubs, which started last school year, have helped reduce fights and the number of students being left out, she said.

Ave said she hears that "so-and-so won't let me play" or "I have no one to play with" less often this year.

Often thought of as kids being kids, ostracism is more than a recess problem. It appears in subtle ways in classrooms and playgrounds, in workplaces and even among families and churches.

It's the lack of a passing smile, a look that seems to go right through you or even a cellphone that doesn't buzz as often as the ones around it.

Ignoring someone sends the message that a person isn't even worth being bullied through words or actions, Williams said. It leaves people with low self-esteem and feeling sad or angry. Those ostracized are less likely to use self-restraint, which can lead to aggressive actions, he said.

"If you are hit or shoved or punched, you don't relieve the pain," Williams said. "But social pain, you relive and feel the pain again when you think about it."

Research shows that social pain registers in the same place in the brain as physical pain, he said. And when one feels he has been rejected, his temperature drops ever so slightly, another sign that rejection is more real than we wish to think.

A person who feels rejected by society is more likely to conform with a group — any group — just to fit in. The feeling of isolation may reach a point where a person acts out just to get attention.

"They think they'll get noticed for being evil," Williams said.

The film references the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado that left 14 students and one teacher dead. The perpetrators were two seniors who had been victims of bullying and felt rejected by the "in" crowd.

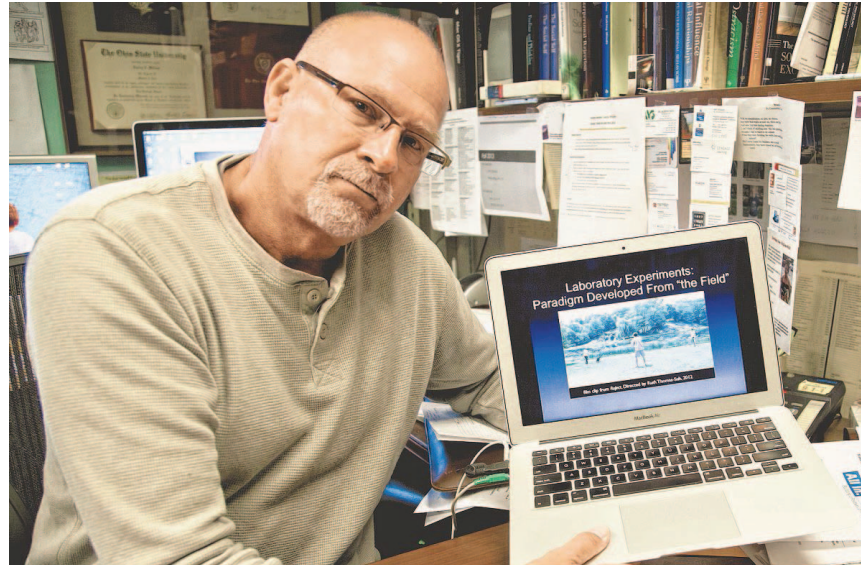
Williams said ostracism isn't what causes people to commit mass shootings, perhaps, but it can be a contributing factor.

"We don't think about this group and how that can make people make poor choices," Williams said.

Testing ostracism in lab

Telling the story of children and the rejection they face, "Reject" combines personal experiences and real-life stories with science to address social exclusion and rejection, Thomas-Suh said.

"It's neuroscience to juvenile justice," she said. "I think that a teacher can talk about the same



Purdue University professor Kipling Williams shows some of the video he uses to talk about his research on ostracism. Williams has studied ostracism for 20 years and is featured in a documentary called "Reject" that is showing as part of the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis. Williams and the film's director will participate in upcoming forums in Carroll County about ostracism. PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HEINZ/JOURNAL & COURIER

kind of thing as a neuroscientist is very interesting."

She said her father, Herbert E. Thomas, wrote a book called "The Shame Response to Rejection." In it he discussed a theory linking ostracism to physical pain and violent behavior. She began looking into the science behind the theory before deciding to make the documentary.

"The science was critical," she said. Otherwise, viewers might dismiss what they see as complaining or being weak.

Williams' interest in the subject began with a chance encounter.

He was on an outing with his dog when he came upon two men playing Frisbee catch. A bad toss, and the Frisbee rolled his way. He picked it up and threw it back to the two players, who began to include him in their game.

"I threw it back to them and moved toward their group," he said. "After about four minutes, they stopped throwing to me, and they just started throwing it to each other. ... And then I realized it's just never going to get to me again, and I felt terrible."

Williams went back to his dog and sat down. The experience stuck with him even after he returned to work. How could such a simple, random act have such a lasting, negative impact?

Painful to watch

He began thinking of a way to test ostracism in the laboratory. He developed Cyberball, a virtual game of catch in which players are randomly included or excluded.

"Cyberball had big effects with no awkward discomfort," he said. A hidden camera recorded the reactions of participants. In a short period of time, their faces fell, and they became upset as they realized the ball was never coming to them.

"It's painful just to watch," he said. Participants who were left out had lower self-esteem, were sadder and more willing to conform to the group. As Williams continued his research, he found that even brief moments of ostracism still had an impact — although most people might believe a stranger's inattention doesn't bother them.

A person not acknowledged by a passer-by while walking down the street is more likely to say he felt socially disconnected, compared to when a stranger smiled or made eye contact, Williams said.

Social media produces similar reactions when, for example, fewer text messages are

IF YOU GO

THE HEARTLAND FILM FESTIVAL

For a schedule of film times, locations and ticket information, visit www.trulymovingpictures.org/heartland-film-festival.

ALL IN: BUILDING A POSITIVE COMMUNITY

A three-part series from the Purdue Extension to discuss ostracism and developing a community action plan. All the sessions begin with a light meal at 6 p.m., with the programs at 6:30 p.m. The series is free; there is no registration. Children's activities are provided.

» A screening of the documentary "Reject" for adults 19 and older and discussion with Williams and Thomas-Suh is Oct. 30 at Delphi Community High School Little Theater, 301 Armory Road, Delphi.

» A discussion led by Williams to talk about research about inclusion/exclusion and strategies for handling ostracism and rejection is Nov. 6 at Carroll Jr.-Sr. High School cafeteria, 2362 E. Indiana 18, Flora.

» A discussion about actions to build more inclusive relationships is Nov. 13 at the Wabash and Erie Canal Interpretive Center, 1030 N. Washington St., Delphi.



Part of a video that Williams uses to talk about his research on ostracism.

received, or a Facebook status is unnoticed, he said.

"For every new way of connecting, there is a way of disconnecting," Williams said.

"I see bullying as an extreme form of rejection," Thomas-Suh said. "Bullying people is known as overt power over one person, but this is just as potent (though) not as obvious."

Positive messages

Awareness about bullying continues to spread. With texting and social media, kids can be mean and not see how they hurt the other person, said Kelly Rice, a co-founder of Kids Rallying Against Bullying in Tippecanoe County.

The organization began in March after the suicide of Battle Ground Middle School eighth-grader Angel Green. Her death galvanized Rice and Andy Ingram, a fellow parent in Tippecanoe School Corp.

Through a Facebook page, K.R.A.B. spreads a positive message and helps to connect kids struggling with bullying to counselors and others who can help. Rice said there is a difference between not inviting people to a party and not inviting them because they are fat or ugly.

At Carroll Elementary School in Flora, bullying is addressed by school leaders and parents of all the children involved in the incident.

"Bullying has a pattern and gives the person power over the other," principal Amanda Skinner said. Ostracism, while a form of bullying, can be harder to detect.

"A lot of bullying happens not when the teacher is looking directly at them," said Don Shively, who teaches sixth-grade science at Carroll. "I'm not sure kids will say, 'I'm being left out.' It's more something you observe."

When aggressive bullying and rejection are combined, Thomas-Suh said, it can lead to violent behavior.

Adults affected, too

Last fall, at an annual conference, Purdue Extension leaders previewed "Reject," which premiered at the Cleveland International Film Festival in April.

"We were all very moved and felt that we could make a difference by taking it to the community and bringing awareness to schools and workplaces," said Janet Ayres, a Purdue sociologist who focuses on rural communities. She helped plan the forum. "I think it affects adults as much as children."

Carroll County is a pilot site for the program and is the first to use "Reject" in this way. The "All In" forum will develop a toolbox that can be used in other counties; a second pilot site will begin in the spring in southern Indiana, Ayres said.

"We intend to take it statewide," she said.

The first night of the Delphi forum will feature a screening of "Reject" and discussion with Thomas-Suh and her father. At the Nov. 6 session, Williams will speak about his research. The following week's session will focus on how to forge positive community relationships and action plans, said Joanne Lytton, the Purdue Extension educator for Carroll County. She works with youths and families.

"In a small county, we can reach a lot of people. We know the local leaders, the police, the 4-H leaders, the Boy Scouts," Lytton said. "Parents can come, but the people we are targeting are adults that work with youth, like coaches, Scouts, 4-H, the two school systems. Our hope is that everyone comes together."

The forum will establish a communitywide language so there are shared definitions for teachers and other adults who work with kids, said Christopher Lagoni, superintendent of Carroll Consolidated School Corp.

"It's just as important that the definition that's used for 6.5 hours a day is also used the rest of the day," he said.

Although "Reject" focuses on children, Ayres said, the forum will show that ostracism is a deep-seated issue in schools and workplaces.

"We know bullying. That we understand. But it's the treating people as if they don't exist," she said. Ayres experienced ostracism when she started her career as a woman in a male-dominated field, she said. Many adults are able to get through it and be resilient.

"But for children, when they are rejected over and over again, it doesn't give them much hope," she said.

Thomas-Suh agreed. "It has a call to action," she said. "It asks people to look in their backyard for the effects."

The sooner children are taught to include others, the better, Williams said. Thomas-Suh agreed. Her film includes the example of an Oklahoma school that does just that.

"Look what happens when we teach little children. If they learn at 4, 5 or 6 years old, it prevents later behaviors," she said. "We are working backwards so we are not growing up to do this to each other."